NORMAN G. FINKELSTEIN

THE RISE & FALL OF PALESTINE

A PERSONAL ACCOUNT OF THE INTIFADA YEARS

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NORMAN G. FINKELSTEIN

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To Samira and Moussa

As in the last days of Pompeii, there was disintegration; restraints and prohibitions disappeared. . . . I knew about people who were corrupt and I didn't always condemn them because the accepted norm was: "Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die." . . . There were, however, also instances of moral dignity. People sought a way to us, wanted to help us. Citizens without any political affiliation . . . There were a lot of instances of dignified behavior, an expression of solidarity of simple people who weren't members of a movement. . . . [W]hen we were in danger, we always found people to hide us. . . . There was a class of people in the ghetto who lived the good life all the time. These were smugglers and the economic collaborators, not the collaborators, the bastards, the Gestapo agents. These smugglers and economic opportunists were another level of collaborator. Perhaps we could say — with grief and bitterness — this group also included the leadership of the political parties: they had plenty of money, which they got from various sources. . . . At any rate, they didn't go hungry.

Yitzhak Zuckerman, *A Surplus of Memory: Chronicles of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising*

Contents

Key Abbreviations and Foreign Terms xi

Author's Note xii

Acknowledgments xiii

Chronology xiv

Dramatis Personae xv

1
The Truth from Palestine, Revisited 1

2
The Ordinary, the Awful, and the Sublime 18

3
A Double Standard in the Application of International Law 44

4
Why Palestinians Cheered the Scud Missiles 69

Epilogue
The End of Palestine? 85

Notes 123

Index 153

Key Abbreviations and Foreign Terms

ADC	American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee
CRM	Citizen's Rights Movement
GSS	General Security Services
IDF	Israel Defense Forces
jaysh	Israeli army
MEW	Middle East Watch
PFLP	Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine
PLO	Palestine Liberation Organization
PNC	Palestine National Council
shebab	young Palestinian militants
UNC	Unified National Command

Author's Note

I first traveled to Palestine in August 1988 as part of an American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) human rights delegation. Two chance encounters — with Samira Mikhail of Beit Sahour and Moussa Abu Hashhash of Fawwar refugee camp — developed into enduring friendships as I returned to Palestine in successive years at their invitation. Samira and Moussa trusted me to enter their lives and experience Palestine without blinders. All they wanted in return was that I truthfully report what I witnessed. I have done so to the best of my ability; I hope I have not disappointed them. What follows is a chronicle of those visits as well as the intervening tragedy in the Gulf. Chapters 1, 2, 4, and the epilogue were written after trips to the West Bank in, respectively, August 1988, August 1989, August 1991, and December 1993. Chapter 3 was written on the eve of the Gulf "war" in December 1990 (appendix 1 in January 1992, appendix 2 in November 1992). Aside from minor additions, I have decided to reproduce the original manuscripts more or less intact so as to better preserve the spirit of those remarkable times.

Acknowledgments

Over the past seven years I benefited from the generosity of many individuals; no words can adequately convey my gratitude. I want especially to thank Nabeel Abraham, Rudolph Baldeo, Jonathan Boyarin, Roane Carey, Carol Chomsky, Noam Chomsky, Carolyn Fialkow, Samira Haj, Joanne Koslofsky, Ellen Mastromonaco, Allan Nairn, Adele Oltman, Eyal Press, Nawal Ragheb, Frank Sheed, Shifra Stern, and Cyrus Veeser. Unless otherwise indicated, Hebrew-language periodicals are cited from Israel Shahak's invaluable *Translations from the Hebrew Press*. While I was preparing this manuscript for publication, my mother and father — both survivors of the Warsaw Ghetto and the Nazi concentration camps — passed away. My grief is inexpressible, as is my debt to them.

Chronology

December 1987	*Intifada* begins as Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza revolt against twenty-year-long Israeli occupation
November 1988	Palestine National Council meeting in Algiers formally ratifies a two-state settlement of Israel-Palestine conflict
August 1990	Iraq invades Kuwait
January 1991	U.S.-led assault on Iraq begins
February 1991	Iraq withdraws from Kuwait
October 1991	Madrid peace talks convene to resolve Israel-Palestine conflict
September 1993	Israel and PLO sign Oslo accord

Dramatis Personae

Samira Mikhail is an English teacher from Beit Sahour
Stephan, Rana, Rita, and **Basil** are, respectively, Samira's husband and three children

Moussa Abu Hashhash is an English teacher from Fawwar camp
Afaf, Marwa, Urwa, and **Arwa** are, respectively, Moussa's wife and three children

George Hanna is a Bir Zeit University physicist from Beit Sahour

Mufid Hanna and **Nadim Issa** are youths from Beit Sahour

Esmail Abu Hashhash is a mathematics teacher from Fawwar camp

Caid El-Janazreh is an agricultural engineer from Fawwar camp

Chapter 1

The Truth from Palestine, Revisited

Nearly a century ago, the Zionist writer Ahad Ha'am observed in his classic essay, "The Truth from Palestine," that the Zionist movement had failed to grasp the challenge posed by Palestine's indigenous population:

> We tend to believe abroad that all Arabs are desert barbarians, an asinine people who does not see or understand what is going on around them. This is a cardinal mistake. The Arab, like all Semites, has a sharp mind and is full of cunning.... The Arabs... understand very well what we want and what we do in the country; but they behave as if they do not notice it because at present they do not see any danger for themselves or their future in what we are doing.... But when the day will come in which the life of our people in the Land of Israel will develop to such a degree that they will push aside the local population by little or by much, then it will not easily give up its place.[1]

Regarding the pervasive belief among Zionist settlers that "the only language the Arabs understand is force," Ahad Ha'am went on to warn:

> One thing we certainly should have learned from our past and present history, and that is not to create anger among the local population against us.... We have to treat the local population with love and respect, justly and rightly. And what do our brethren in the Land of Israel do? Exactly the opposite!... They behave toward the Arabs with hostility and cruelty, infringe upon their boundaries, hit them shamefully without reason, and even brag about it. Our brethren are right when they say that the Arab honors only those who show valor and fortitude; but this is the case only when he feels that the other side has justice on his side. It is very different when the Arab thinks that his opponent's actions are iniquitous and unlawful; in that case he may keep his anger to himself for a long time, but it will dwell in his heart and in the long run he will prove himself to be vengeful and full of retribution.[2]

I

We were standing on a balcony in the Tel al-Zaatar neighborhood (renamed after the Palestinian refugee camp martyred during the Lebanese civil war) of Beit Sahour when Samira Mikhail slipped outside to join us. Like the rest of

us, she immediately turned her head toward the awful ritual unfolding some fifty yards ahead.

Even by the stringent standards of the *intifada,* Beit Sahour, a Palestinian-Christian town just south of Bethlehem, enjoyed an unusual reputation for militancy. As the *intifada* began in December 1987, it was the first Palestinian community to stop paying taxes to the occupying authorities and also took impressive steps toward popular self-government and economic independence.

This Sunday morning, rumor had it that in response to an Israeli order expelling twenty-five more residents from Gaza, there would be an "action" in Beit Sahour after church services. I had arrived early with a photographer friend, but, although noontime was fast approaching, we still didn't see anything unusual. Suddenly, several children — the average age of the *intifada* vanguard couldn't have been more than twelve years because the "older generation" of teenagers and young adults were by then either in jail or hiding out — began piling stones in the street. Past experience suggested that, any minute, the *jaysh* (Israeli army) would drive up in jeeps and all hell would break loose.

The stone "barricade," erected on a side street deep inside the town, was a purely symbolic gesture of defiance and self-affirmation. And it was precisely for this reason that Israelis could be expected to react ruthlessly to it, determined as they were — it was stated officially — to "once again put the fear of death" into the Palestinians and "wipe the smile" off their faces.

In fact, every expression of Palestinian "violence" I witnessed during my stay in the occupied territories was little more than symbolic, though the same could not be said for the force used to suppress it. Once, at Jalazoun refugee camp, children were burning a tire off the main road inside the camp when a car (with a blue Palestinian license plate)* pulled up next to it. The doors swung open, and four men (either settlers or the army in plainclothes) jumped out, shooting with abandon in every direction. The boy beside me was shot in the back, the bullet exiting from his navel. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF), stationed immediately outside the camp, moved in and imposed a curfew. Next day the *Jerusalem Post* reported that the army had fired in self-defense.

Of course, the army often did not wait for or need a pretext to strike. Indeed, the most salient feature of the Israeli occupation was the lawlessness and unpredictability of the terror. For fairly long stretches of time, the rhythms of Palestinian life might be left undisturbed. The terror was omnipresent but latent; it underlay daily life without displacing it. Soon enough,

*In the occupied territories, Palestinians were issued blue license plates while Jews were issued yellow plates.